

Essay

Essay from Expatriate in Czech

SAITO Takuya

1. Introduction

From April 2021 to April 2025, I was stationed in Pardubice, Czech Republic as a procurement officer.

During this time, I worked as a Procurement Section Manager at KYB Manufacturing Czech s.r.o. (KMCZ), where I was responsible for procuring direct and indirect materials. I also promoted the organizational integration of the Procurement Department of KMCZ and the Procurement Department of the Navarra Branch of KYB Europe GmbH (KEU), which oversees our Spanish bases KYB Suspensions Europe S.A.U. (KYBSE) and KYB Advanced Manufacturing Spain S.A.U. (KAMS).

My four-year assignment coincided with a period of rapid change in the European economic environment. This significantly impacted my expatriate life.

I would like to share a few things about my experience.

2. Czech Republic

Before introducing the city, I would like to introduce the Czech Republic. It is located in Central Europe, and its capital is Prague. It lies east of Germany, north of Austria, and south of Poland. It is a vast, landlocked country with predominantly plain terrain. The terrain is a basin surrounded by mountains. Its population of approximately 10 million is smaller than Tokyo's. Its latitude is higher than Hokkaido's, and temperatures are about 5°C lower. During the winter, bitterly cold temperatures below 0°C freeze the cities.

The Pardubice Region, where KMCZ is located, is situated approximately 100 km east of Prague, a two-hour drive.

When I was a student, I studied in Germany and spent some time in Prague. At that time, I was overwhelmed by the cultural and linguistic differences, partly because it was my first visit to Central and Eastern Europe. I never imagined that I would return to the Czech Republic for work.

No matter how many times I visit, I am always impressed by the beautiful cities and lush nature of the Czech Republic. It's an excellent country for tourism and leisure. In particular, Mount Sněžka in the northern Czech Republic was especially beautiful (Photo 1).



Photo 1 Mount Sněžka in the northern Czech Republic

While preserving historical buildings and nature, the country is rapidly developing its infrastructure, including highways and modern buildings. I was particularly surprised by how widely cashless payments are accepted everywhere. I was amazed that they even worked at the lodge on the top of Sněžka, the highest mountain in the Czech Republic.

If I have the chance to visit the Czech Republic again, the cityscape will probably be even more modern.

3. Assignment During the Pandemic

I was assigned to the Czech Republic in April 2021, at the height of the pandemic. The flight was noticeably empty, with passengers sparsely seated in window seats. There were few travelers during that time. I was impressed that immigration inspections were held at both Frankfurt Airport in Germany during my transit and at Prague Airport. After arriving at my apartment, I was required to quarantine for one week. With food for a week supplied in advance, I began living in a foreign country without meeting anyone else. I had nothing to do but watch the river flowing beside my apartment through the window.

During the lockdown, the country imposed strict regulations, including an obligation to wear respirator masks and a prohibition on riding with two or more people. Only supermarkets selling groceries were permitted to open.

During the initial stage of my expatriation, I

spent most of my time at home and had minimal interactions with others because I was nervous about the anti-virus measures. I did not feel like I was actually working abroad.

4. Work in the Czech Republic

As a Procurement Section Manager, my primary responsibilities included managing the procurement of components for four-wheel shock absorbers, KYB's core product, and promoting the localization of procurement for parts sourced from Central and Eastern Europe.

I initiated operations aimed at restructuring the procurement department so that it could ultimately conduct procurement primarily through local staff, in line with the intention of the KYB headquarters.

Since I was assigned to the position of Procurement Section Manager, I performed duties similar to those of locally hired managers. These duties included daily meetings and discussions with staff from other departments, as well as recruitment and human resource management of local staff.

I had to use English for work, including negotiating with suppliers throughout Europe. Due to the pandemic, I struggled to negotiate with suppliers I had never met in person and had not yet established a relationship with via web conferences without an interpreter. As you know, European countries speak different languages. They tend to speak broken English, and it took me some time to get used to it. The pandemic created a severe economic environment inside and outside our company, causing everyone to become tense. Negotiating with external partners under such pressure was extremely difficult. Local staff relied on me because of my position. I could not use my lack of English fluency as an excuse. Additionally, I had to familiarize myself with European business manners, laws, culture, and nationality in order to run the organization, which was hard work. I managed to do so by clarifying uncertain aspects and securing the cooperation of local staff.

After 2021, when I was assigned to the Czech Republic, the following phenomena occurred in particular (Fig. 1), in addition to the worsened economic environment due to the pandemic.

- Skyrocketing steel prices after the pandemic
- Rising marine transportation costs
- Rising electricity and gas prices
- Production impacts due to semiconductor shortages
- Risk of Russian gas pipeline shutdown
- Bankruptcies of Czech electric utilities
- Iron ore shortages due to the war in Ukraine
- Risk of supplier bankruptcies due to various price hikes
- Supply anxiety due to strikes

One after another, we were hit with challenges due to changes in the external environment, leaving us no time to catch our breath.

Around that time, we started communicating more frequently with the procurement staff at our base in Spain. In addition to existing connections between executives, Spanish and Czech procurement personnel frequently exchanged

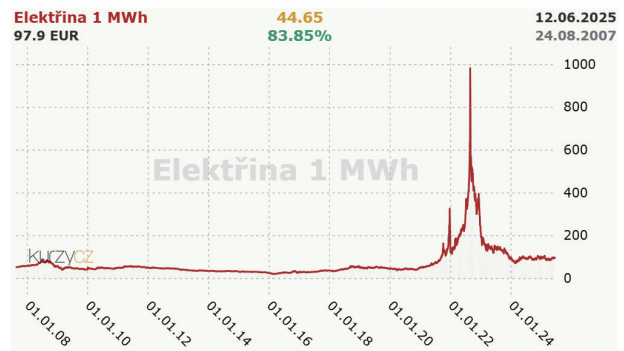


Fig. 1 Czech public electricity charges (EUR/MWh)

information. This made me feel like we were one team sharing both hardships and joys. The external environment in Europe prompted the growth in both procurement departments.

5. Organizational Integration into KEU Procurement

Meanwhile, KMCZ's high turnover rate was challenging. At that time, two employees resigned simultaneously. We began the recruitment process, but operated with staff shortages for over a year with the help of local procurement staff. I am grateful for their commitment to overcoming the challenges together until we found the right people to join our department. During this difficult period, I was also responsible for the duties of absent local staff members. This gave me the opportunity to share their pain, communicate with them on the same level, and develop a mutual understanding. This experience led me to consider merging the Spanish and Czech procurement departments to achieve greater synergies. Throughout this period, we frequently exchanged information with the Spanish procurement department in order to survive the harsh external environment in Europe, as previously mentioned. For example, some suppliers complained that KYB did not provide consistent information between its Spanish and Czech bases. In fact, we received many complaints about the lack of unified specification requirements between the two entities, despite them being part of the same company. Ultimately, we successfully promoted organizational integration on a large scale by obtaining the approval of the European leadership. The cross-border integration of the KEU-KMCZ procurement department involved numerous people inside and outside the company. It was precisely because I was assigned overseas that I was able to gain that valuable experience.

One memorable event was when the equipment we owned at the Czech base suddenly failed. The company had purchased the equipment over ten years ago and maintained it regularly. However, the equipment shut down for an unknown reason, which prevented us from resuming production.

We asked the German manufacturer to repair it, but the person in charge said that they could not visit us for several days due to a full schedule of repair appointments with other customers. The

Czech procurement personnel negotiated as much as possible, but there was no sign of improvement.

Then, a Hungarian supplier we knew kindly put us in touch with the Japanese subsidiary of the German equipment manufacturer. Using the German that I learned while studying in Germany, I negotiated with the German manufacturer, who finally agreed to provide a remote diagnosis for troubleshooting purposes. They identified what needed repair, but the repair parts did not arrive in time.

We shared the information with our Spanish procurement department as well. Fortunately, one of their suppliers had identical repair parts in stock. They brought them to KMCZ urgently, which enabled us to restore the equipment.

As you can see from this story, we had to do business with people in several countries: the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, and Spain. These countries are separated by several thousands of kilometers. Moreover, they speak different languages and live in different time zones. Given that we could not conduct business only within the Czech Republic, I was convinced that integrating the procurement departments and establishing a robust communication system would be critical.

6. How to Spend a Holiday

You might anticipate that shops in Europe are generally closed on weekends. However, in the Czech Republic, even small shops were open on Saturday mornings, and supermarkets and large shopping centers were open on both Saturday and Sunday.

Unlike in Japan, I did not see any entertainment or hobby shops, such as karaoke bars or manga cafes, where you could pass the time alone. In my experience, Czechs tend to spend time in nature on weekends, for example, by walking or cycling through parks and mountains. I felt that living with nature was ingrained in their mindset. Company offices are required to measure natural light. Since seats too far from windows are prohibited by law, I even had to change seats. Despite the winter season, Czechs wore short-sleeved T-shirts and ventilated the room by opening windows to let fresh air in.

Thanks to that environment and my kind boss, I was able to start trekking abroad (Photo 2)

Czech cuisine is similar to German cuisine, with potatoes and meat being staples. This landlocked country has almost no fish dishes. Beer consumption is the highest in the world, and beer is cheap and tasty. This made my body bigger and bigger and caused me to gain weight. I started going to a gym and doing weight training to burn calories. Small gyms are often found in European hotels, and I used them as a hobby whenever I liked.

7. Czech Tourist Attractions and Souvenirs

One famous Czech souvenir is porcelain, such as Bohemian glass and blue onion (Photo 3). These items come in various patterns and include incense holders and trinket boxes. Bohemian glass may be an excellent informal souvenir.

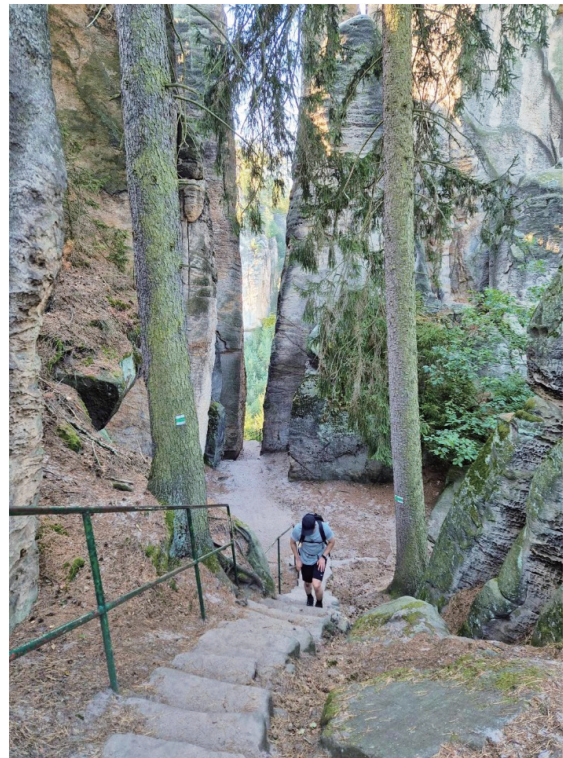


Photo 2 Trekking (Český ráj or Czech Paradise)



Photo 3 Czech porcelain (blue onion)

Popular tourist attractions in the Czech Republic include the city of Prague and Prague Castle. The entire city is a registered World Heritage Site. Simply walking around the city is enjoyable, and you can experience the atmosphere of a medieval European town. The city was clean, with very little litter on the streets (Photos 4 and 5).

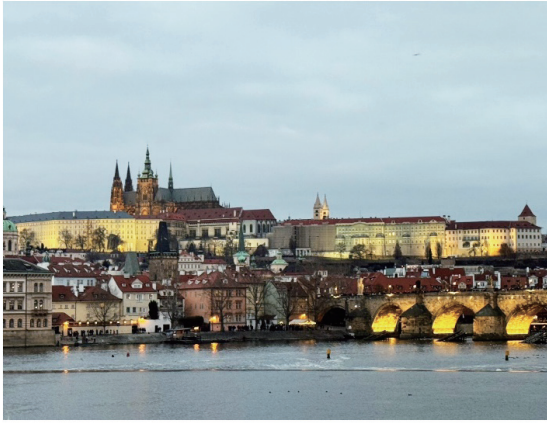


Photo 4 Prague Castle



Photo 5 Christmas market (Prague)

8. In Closing

My four years at KMCZ and my two years working closely with Spanish people as a KEU

procurement officer were invaluable experiences that cannot be replaced. Thanks to the many people involved, including the local staff and other expatriates who worked hard alongside me, I was able to complete my expatriation in foreign countries with different languages and cultures without any major problems. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them.

Furthermore, I was deeply moved by a cross-departmental farewell party that was held by the local staff. It made me feel that I had done the right thing (Photo 6).

I believe that my experiences of living and working in Central and Eastern Europe became a valuable part of my identity. I am committed to applying the experiences and connections I gained during my time abroad to my future work.



Photo 6 Farewell party with local staff

Author



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Joined the company in 2014.
 Cost Planning Dept., Suspension
 Headquarters, Automotive
 Components Operations.
 Taken present post after working
 in Purchasing and Logistics Div.
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